List any constraints that may restrict how you manage your forest. You may wish to share this list with a natural resources professional who can help you develop your plan.

To be an effective tool, your management plan must be practical. It should reflect your hopes and desires for your land, combined with a realistic assessment of your skills and resources. Once you have defined your goals, you can get assistance to assess your forest's condition. It's important to choose management strategies that will take you toward your goals.

Your forest is as individual as you are, reflecting past activities as well as your care and philosophy of land ownership. Decisions made today can have far-reaching effects. Whether your forest is young, middle-aged, or mature, it will be your legacy for the future.

What kind of forest do you have?

Forests vary by elevation, topography, history, soil characteristics, exposure, and drainage. Use this section to help identify the age and condition of your forest and the associated wildlife that may be present in it.

Young forests and openings

Young forests, which range in age up to 10 years, are the result of some type of disturbance or land-use change. This can be the result of weather-related forces (hurricanes, tornadoes, ice storms, fire) and/or human actions such as the development of abandoned farmland or intentional seeding or sprouting after logging operations. A young forest has an abundance of young tree growth, as well as scattered shrubs, weeds, wildflowers, native grasses, and brambles. Goldenrod, asters, black-eyed Susans, broomsedge, blackberry, and pokeweed are most notable.

Young forests and fields provide food and cover for quail, rabbits, bluebirds, goldfinches, indigo buntings, and song sparrows, as well as deer, bear, and turkeys. Ruffed grouse and wild turkey hens also feed their broods in young forest openings where insects are abundant.

Middle-aged forests

As a forest ages, the grasses, weeds, and shrubs of the early stage of forest growth are replaced by trees with relatively small diameters. Middle-aged forests begin to take on the characteristics of more open woodland. This period can range in age from 10 to 70 years. As a middle-aged forest develops, some of the understory vegetation that was so abundant in the young forest is eventually shaded out. Leaf litter begins to cover the forest floor, and brushy cover and food for small wildlife become sparse. Within the midstory tree level, there is an increase in seed and fruit (mast) production, including wild cherry, flowering dogwood, serviceberry, wild grape, and greenbrier vines.

Young regenerating forest opening (top) and a stand of middle-aged hardwoods (bottom).

Mature and overly mature forests

Mature forests are usually made up of large-diameter trees and a diverse understory. The understory development is the result of timber harvesting or a natural thinning process that removes suppressed and diseased trees from the canopy. As larger trees die and fall or are removed, their demise allows more sunlight to reach the understory. Sunlight stimulates the growth of woodland wildflowers, ferns, and low-growing shrubs such as blueberry and huckleberry, adding to the beauty and wildlife benefits of these forests. A mature forest may remain standing for another century until age, disease, insects, pollution, and other factors work to begin the cycle anew. Straight, healthy, mature trees can produce good sawtimber for furniture and homebuilding. Mature